

[AUSTRALIAN TALKIE SHORTS]

Year of release: 1929

While the history of Australian film has invariably identified either *Fellers* (1930) or *Showgirl's Luck* (1931) as the first Australian "talkies,"¹ the focus on feature films has ignored the fact that moving pictures with synchronised sound were produced in Australia as early as 1929. In July of that year, for example, the proprietors of Australtone, a machine invented in Australia by radio engineer William J. Tighe for the screening of sound pictures, set up a studio in the lecture hall of the Royal Sydney Showgrounds for the purpose of making some sixteen music and recitation shorts.² Each of the films was photographed by cinematographer Arthur Higgins, with the sound recordings produced by Broadcasters Limited, Melbourne. These were then screened before a private audience of trade professionals at Queen's Theatre, Crow's Nest on 31 July.



W.J. Tighe
National Advocate (Bathurst,
NSW) 9 Sept. 1929, 3.



Fred Bluett
Source: State Library of
Queensland

Headlining the series were vaudeville stars **Fred Bluett** (songs) and **Hector St Clair** (humour). Other artists included Norman Wright (songs), Miss Mabel Barham (violin selections), Charles Wade (songs), and Rohmer and Corrie and Don Bennett (songs at the piano). Fred Bluett's contribution is believed to have been his comic song "I Know Where the Flies Go."³



Some of the shorts, including Fred Bluett's performance, accompanied a central-west New South Wales tour of the feature film *The Donovan Affair*. This American talkie was also exhibited via the Australtone machine. Tighe later took the machine and his talkie shorts to other Australian centres including Perth.

Hector St Clair
Queensland Figaro 31 Oct. 1927, 7.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. Attempts to identify the first Australian feature talkie invariably require consideration of the first to be put in to production and the first to be exhibited before a public audience. Even with these prerequisites in mind the issue is still one of significant complexity.

The first Australian talkie to begin production, A.R. Harwood's *Out of the Shadows* was abandoned shortly before production was completed when the only set of wax discs buckled in a heat wave. Filming had begun in March 1930. Three months later Norman Dawn began shooting *Showgirl's Luck*. However, its release was delayed until November 1931 due to complications with the original soundtrack.

Two other films were produced and exhibited in between May 1930 and November 1931, but both had their partial soundtrack recorded and added after filming had been completed, and hence the sound should be considered "additional" rather than produced as a "talkie." The first of these, Paulette McDonagh's *The Cheaters*

¹ See "Historical Notes and Corrections" below for further details.

² Ctd. "Australian Talkie Invention," 5.

³ This was the title of the music clip that was presented as a support to *The Donovan Affair*.

screened in May 1931, while Arthur Higgins *Fellers* was given its premiere in August 1931. Only the final part of the latter film includes sound dialogue by the actors, though. The rest of the film includes a musical soundtrack but is silent in terms of the actor dialogue.

These pioneering efforts in sound/film synchronisation were not the first time that Australian audiences heard sound in conjunction with moving images, however. As early as 1906 the Chronomegaphone system, a form of early talkie, allowed sound (via a gramophone record) and moving pictures to be presented at the same time. Among the best-known vaudeville performers to be seen and heard via the Chronomegaphone Scottish music hall comedian [Harry Lauder](#) and Australian comedian [Albert Whelan](#).⁴

2. In Chapter Five of their 1983 publication, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, Graham Shirley and Brian Adams record that in late-1928 and early-1929, Sydney engineer Ray Allsop made four shorts comprising music performances or routines "in the course of developing his Rayco-phone projection equipment."⁵ Although the authors make no mention of any eventual exhibition of these shorts, a number of later publications have interpreted their observations as inferring that the films were screened during the first public presentation of the Rayco-phone, system. This event was held on 10 June 1929 at the Wintergarden Theatre, in Rose Bay, Sydney. These unsubstantiated claims have been published in various secondary resources, including *The A to Z of Australian and New Zealand Cinema* (2009) by Albert Moran and Errol Vieth, and the *Historical Dictionary of Australian and New Zealand Cinema* (2017) by Karina Aveyard, Albert Moran, and Errol Vieth. Australian Screen's [Film and Television Chronology](#) page for the 1920s even suggests that the Rayco-phone was developed and the films produced and exhibited all on the same day (?): "On 29 June 1929," notes the entry "engineer Ray Allsop invented the Raycophone sound projector and exhibited four short sound-on-disc musical films he had produced" (clearly an error of grammar). However, if Allsop did indeed exhibit his own films on 29 June he did so several weeks after the big gala demonstration at the Rose Bay Wintergarden.⁶

Research conducted by the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* has so far failed to find any evidence supporting the claim that Allsop publically exhibited his own films using the Rayco-phone projector. Indeed, reviews of the company's trade demonstration (7 June) and the first public presentation of the Rayco-phone at the Rose Bay Wintergarden, indicate the following support programme to the feature film, an American talkie called *Nearly Divorced*:

A batch of giggling show-girls shuffling the latest jazz; a lumbering British war-tank crunching its destructive way through fields, forests, and fences; a noisy village street in France, with sheep, dogs, and shepherd-boys in full possession: musical and dramatic interludes on the Broadway stage; [and] speeches by President Hoover and Congressmen both in and outside Parliament.⁷

No mention is made of any Australian-made films being included during either event. If some local films were included in the programme it is more feasible that they were filmed by a specialist cinematographer, as were the shorts used by William Tighe for his Australtone demonstration. The Allsop films were more likely to have been produced for experimental purposes during the development phase only.

3. The Australtone machine reportedly sold for £600 in 1929. Its sound reproduction tonal qualities were said to be good, with the violin performances by Mabel Barham "almost perfect" ("Australian Films," 12).
4. Australtone's director in 1929 was Oscar Curtis.
5. For insight into the competition between Australia's leading sound-on-disc companies during the late-1920s and early-1930s, especially the fight for supremacy between Australtone and Rayco-phone see:

Yecies, Brian M. "[Talking Salvation for the Silent Majority: Projecting New Possibilities of Modernity in the Australian Cinema, 1929-1933](#)." In *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity: Essays on the History of Sound*. Eds. Joy Damousi Desley Deacon. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007, 133-158.

⁴ For further details see: Clay Djubal "[Australian Film and Vaudeville as Intermedial Industries, 1896 to ca. 1935: An Introduction](#)." *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* (Film and Vaudeville section).

⁵ Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, 105.

⁶ Sighted 21 March 2018.

⁷ "[Feast of Sound: Local Invention](#)." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 9 June 1929, 2. See also "[All Pleased: Australian Invention - New Talkie Plant](#)." *Sun* (Sydney) 7 June 1929, 17.

FURTHER REFERENCE

- "All-Australian Talkies: The Australtone - First Trade Screening." *Labor Daily* (Sydney) 1 Aug. 1929, 5.
"Australian Films." *Sydney Morning Herald* 1 Aug. 1929, 12.
"Australian Talkie Invention: All About Australtone - The Inventor Visits Perth." *Mirror* (Perth) 21 Sept. 1929, 5.
"Australian Talkies." *Sunday Times* (Sydney) 28 July 1929, 5.
"Australian Talkies. Through Local Equipment: Screening in Sydney." *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas) 2 Aug. 1929, 5.
Shirley, Graham and Brian Adams. *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*. Sydney: Currency, 1989, 104-105.

See also:

Film Weekly: 18 July 1929, 3 • 8 Aug. 1929, 12.

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Daily Examiner (Grafton, NSW) 24 Dec. 1929, 1.